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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses readers' advisory services in academic libraries from the 1920s to the present. Highlights include: definition of readers' advisor or advisory; browsing rooms and collections; reasons for the decline of this service in academic libraries; recent decline in reading interest and ability among college students; the importance of recreational reading; use of the World Wide Web by public librarians to provide readers' advisory services; use of the Web by academic libraries to support recreational reading interests; and a list of readers' advisory Web sites. Contains 14 references. (MES)

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The Readers' Advisory in Academic Libraries

Virginia Vesper

ED 430 531

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The Readers' Advisor in the Academic Library

Librarians have always wanted "to provide the right book for the right reader at the right time (Drury1), and the Readers' Advisor has a long tradition of finding that "right book" for the "right reader." The name itself is defining, the Reader's Advisor or Advisory counsels and guides readers or library patrons to needed information or just a good book to read. The definition has, at times, included reference service, but most often the term is used to describe a service for guiding the reader to recreational reading.

The idea for a Readers' Advisor originated with public libraries in the 1920's and spread to academic libraries, where the importance of reading for intellectual development as well as for recreation was recognized. The creation of a browsing area, complementing the Readers' Advisor service became an important element of the academic library in the 1930's. An excellent article by Janelle M. Zauha discusses the early history of browsing rooms, particularly at the University of Iowa. She quotes John B. Kaiser, Director of the University of Iowa Libraries from 1924-27, about the importance of reading and a browsing room. "The Library suggests to the student that he take time each week to read books on some subject entirely outside his regular work: that he make the acquaintance of some of the standard magazines never before encountered....that, above all, he learn to know books as friends and to experience the sheer joy of reading"(Zauha 57). Often these browsing rooms were staffed by a librarian, a Readers' Advisor, whose function was not only to select and maintain the collection, but to provide "the right book to the right reader at the right time." The objective of the browsing collection has remained the same through the years, "to stimulate, entertain, relax; to offer readers the newest attractive books on hobbies, travel, and other personal recreational activities; to entice people into subject areas as yet unexplored by them (Shelton 410). Library literature of the 1930's includes numerous references to browsing rooms in college libraries, dormitories and fraternity houses, as well as articles encouraging Readers' Advisor services for both academic and public libraries.

In the 1940's the popularity of this service declined, at least as a formalized position or policy. For academic libraries, the death knell came from Harvie Branscomb, Director of Duke University Libraries who published a book in 1940 entitled, *Teaching With Books: A Study of College Libraries,* which was the result of a study investigating the role of the library in undergraduate education. Branscomb believed that for students "there will be little time for outside reading....The college library, it can be argued, needs to take its own task more seriously, not to attempt the role of the public library, the great concern of which with recreational reading is itself questionable"(qtd. in Farber 4). So, after a brief moment of glory in the 1930's the Readers' Advisor in academic libraries became only a memory. Browsing rooms continued to exist but without a librarian to assist students.

With some notable exceptions, the Browsing Room has been tolerated, but not usually encouraged, in academic libraries. At the University of Illinois, the Illini Union Browsing Room has survived, but even this collection only survived because external funding came to the rescue in 1991. Other exceptions are the University of Indiana and the University of Michigan which have residence halls that serve as learning centers, encouraging the expansion of intellectual and cultural development. Based on the

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premise that reading and libraries are vital to life-long learning, each residence hall has a library. These libraries have a variety of knowledge-based resources including reference as well as recreational titles, and at each library, a Head Librarian, a graduate student from the School of Information advises students with the help of a team of Library Assistants.
Browsing rooms, the "Cinderella" of academic library services have been virtually ignored for several decades. A survey done by Susan Marks in May, 1975 of the nations's thirty largest university libraries had 24 respondents. Only twelve of these responding libraries still had browsing collections (95). Possible reasons for the decline in this service include open stacks, shrinking funds for library resources, the information explosion, and the love affair with technology. Given the current financial crisis on most campuses, the emphasis on accountability, and the constant struggle to meet the curricular needs of the academic community, spending funds for recreational reading seems like buying cut flowers for a dinner table centerpiece when you don't have enough money for the entree. Time, money and staff have been in short supply for a text-based service deemed marginal or non-essential to the college community.

Librarians have rationalized the existence of browsing collections, in times when expenditures on this type of material might be criticized, and have sought inexpensive and imaginative methods of supporting acquisitions to this collection by buying paperbacks, accepting donations, using book sale funds, rental plans, lost books from airports, etc. A common practice and solution for many libraries is to temporarily shelve selected new additions to the collection in the browsing area.
Many librarians, who are readers and bibliophiles, see the advantages of "encouraging recreational reading, which in turn can increase general and specific reading interests. At a time when headlines warn of the decline in college students' ability and desire to read, the existence of browsing rooms should not be jeopardized, but encouraged"(Marks 95). Alan Bloom in the *Closing of American Mind* laments "our students have lost the practice of and taste for reading. They have not learned how to read, nor do they have the expectation of delight or improvement from reading"(62). Three studies in the 1980's, reported in Zill's *Who Reads Literature?,* point to a decline in reading by young adults in the United States (19). Two of these studies were sponsored by the Book Industry Study Group and the third study, Survey of Public Participation in the Arts was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. Studies site a variety of reasons for the decline in reading interest and ability (Zill). In a presentation concerning the reading habits and abilities of college students at the International Reading Association meeting in 1988, Evan Farber hypothesized that two of the possible reasons for the lack of reading among college students were that academic libraries do not encourage recreational reading and that many students suffer from "library anxiety" which causes them to avoid the library unless absolutely necessary (2). The Browsing room and a Readers' Advisory Service seems an obvious
remedy to this situation, and in the past was recognized as instrumental in encouraging reading. In 1936, Professors Randall and Goodrich writing about browsing rooms in the *Principles of College Library Administration,* stated, "The amount of free reading done in a college will be commensurate with the supply of material of a readable nature which is furnished and with the ease with which it may be secured. Any activities, therefore, which result in increasing the supply or the accessibility of readable and interesting books are likely to be useful in the encouragement of reading" (151-152). The influential author of *The Administration of the College Library,* Guy R. Lyle devotes a whole chapter to encouraging reading, especially recreational reading in the 1949 edition of this book. He includes a most impassioned plea and defense for recreational reading and a readers' advisor from a former president of Brown University, Henry M Wriston.

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In a large and more genuine sense, however, recreational reading is often the most
truly educational, even the most really intellectual, element in experiences with
and through books. It may well furnish an intellectual project within which the
student establishes his own goals and determines his own significant values. It is
the place where his tastes, aptitudes, and skills find freest play. Individual
differences, recognition of which is the keynote of modern education, here come to
richest fulfilment. It is precisely through independent reading that the task of
knotting together the raveled sleeve of information may best be achieved. Here the
student's own philosophical structure takes form as a result of reading and
reflection. A shrewd and wise person, who knows the student and has the gift for
offering stimulating suggestions, makes as direct and profound an impact upon his
development, as any professor, of whatever degree or distinction ( qtd. in Lyle
246).
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While browsing collections have survived, the readers' advisor has seemingly disappeared from academic libraries. The vestigial remains can only be glimpsed in the division of books into genre categories, displays of books for special occasions, or bibliographies. Although there has been a renewed interest in Readers' Advisory in the public libraries during the last decade, this interest has not yet appeared in academic libraries. But there is a glimmer of a resurgence of interest in browsing collections and readers' advisory services in discussions on academic library listservs. Perhaps as a backlash to the impersonalization of technology, a renewed interest in reading, book arts, and book discussion groups is taking place. Ironically, libraries and librarians, using the same technology that many feel is in direct opposition to reading and literacy, are providing inexpensive Readers' Advisory services to their patrons.

Public Librarians have been actively exploring the use of the Internet for providing such services. An example is the Mid-Illinois Readers' Advisory Group (MIRAGe), which is a group of librarians who are interested in developing their Readers' Advisory skills and in promoting literature and reading for pleasure. MIRAGe was formed as the result of an October 1993 meeting. Those librarians in attendance expressed interest in forming a group in central/mid-Illinois to provide practical programs, bibliographies, and networking opportunities for librarians working with adult fiction readers' advisory services. Another example is the sophisticated tool for online Readers' Advisory that has been marketed by the CARL Corporation since 1994. NoveList is an electronic readers' advisory resource which provides subject access to more than 34,000 adult fiction titles and more than 6000 full text book reviews. An excellent overview of how the Internet can be used for Readers' Advisory has been written by Roberta S. Johnson from the Morton Grove Public Library. This article describe how the Internet can be used for Collection Development and answering specific questions from patrons about books.

More and more public libraries are using the Internet web sites to provide Readers' Advisory services to their patrons. One of the best examples of a good site has been developed by two librarians, Janet Lawson and Cynthia Orr. In their own words, they describe *Book Browser*. "*Book Browser* is a collection of fiction reading lists. . We arrange our lists by genre, location, series and anything else we can come up with. The Reading Lists are the core of our site, and are designed to help avid readers locate new books to read. We have tried to combine the browsing quality of the old card catalog with the flexibility and efficiency of the Web. The lists are updated virtually daily, which is one of the wonderful things about the Web!" Although presently there are no annotations for the individual books, the lists are such that a reader can find a mystery about a librarian, set in Tennessee or an herbalist in Texas, and thereby the reader can make a decision about whether the book will be a good choice. *Book Browser* is an excellent site because of the amount of information presented, the pleasing graphics and logical layout, the additional links to other relevant Internet sites, and the provision for reader input. A library site in New Zealand, has a less comprehensive yet unique presentation for advising readers, based on the premise "If you like.....,try...." Although the layout is unimaginative, the lists are inspired, suggesting titles for both books and music, based upon what the reader already knows and likes. A library may decide to include only links to other sites on a Readers' page, an example is the *Readers' Services* page from the Rochester Hills Public Library. Their *Site for Book Lovers* includes links to book reviews, genre sites, author interviews, and other sites that library patrons would find valuable in obtaining further information about favorite books or authors. Or, a site may include only annotated lists of what is available in their library, such as the Normal Public Library's *Good Reads*. Ideally, the best site should include lists of individual titles with annotations as well as links to Internet sites, such as the Morton Grove Public Library site which is " Dedicated to the lover of fiction and fiction collections..." At the Morton Grove Public Library, the Reader's Service staff offers many special services to library patrons and on-line visitors such as an annotated list of selected new books, annotated bibliographies on many subjects fiction and non-fiction, a list of coming bestsellers, and links to other book sites on the Web. A variety of different web sites for Readers' Advisor services have been developed by public libraries to serve library patrons. Although some may be more inclusive or comprehensive than others, all should be applauded for the time, effort, and imagination needed for the creation of a web site.

The interest in providing Readers' Advisory services for public libraries is understandable since one of the primary functions of the public library is to provide recreational reading for library patrons; however, for academic libraries, where the provision of recreational reading is usually an auxiliary function at best, there has not been the same interest in providing this service. Academic libraries can create web

sites, similar to the ones used by public libraries to direct students to titles in their own library, while at the same time linking them to other information about the author, similar titles, and reviews. By using the Internet, academic libraries have the opportunity to support the recreational reading interests of the college community. An example of an academic site which concentrates on only one genre is the Romance Novel Database by Christina K. Powell. Created when she was a student at the University of Michigan's School of Information and Library Studies, this sites functions as both a readers' advisor and a source of information about books and authors in the genre of romantic fiction. Currently their are over 234 records in this remarkable resource with most having annotations and/or reviews, and an image of the book cover. Another interesting use of the Web for recreational/academic reading is from the Busse Center Library at Mount Mercy College. Their *Newsstand on the Web* is an innovative and useful service for obtaining information from newspapers, journals, and other informational media. One of the ways in which academic libraries are using the Internet is by creating a virtual browsing collection of new books and/or best sellers added to the library collection, as either a complement or substitute for a browsing collection. Examples include sites at the DeVry DuPage Library in Illinois, Grinnell, Cornell University, and the Middle Tennessee State University Library. Most libraries include only a brief bibliographic entry with a call number on their listings of new books. Cornell University's *New Book Shelf,* not only lists the new books, but has linked each title to the book jacket cover and the table of contents. The MTSU Library includes links to book reviews or information about the author to its listing of new titles. Most academic libraries give only a cursory nod to recreational reading even in the virtual library; an example is the library page from the University of Missouri at St. Louis which only lists a few Internet resources, related to leisure reading. *Dollies' Corner* is a virtual reading room at Northwestern University with a list of recent leisure reading and links to recreational Internet sites. The *Browsing Page* from the University of South Carolina has lists of popular titles and new selections, with plot summaries or short comments. The *Readers' Advisory* at Middle Tennessee State University is another virtual browsing room with bibliographies, links to Internet sites, and related information for recreational reading. Academic libraries are just beginning to take advantage of the opportunity to encourage recreational or leisure reading by using the Internet to create virtual browsing rooms for their students, and at present there are not many examples. In the absence of a browsing collection in the library, a web site can provide information on the availability of popular fiction and best sellers in the library collection. Additional information such as annotations, book reviews, or information about the author are easily linked to the site. Links to other Internet sites for the various genres, authors, reviews, and book discussion groups allow students to discover other titles or authors of interest. By using the Web in this manner, academic libraries can still acknowledge the importance of recreational reading to the college student.

However, the primary mission of academic library is to support the curriculum of the college or university, and this is reflected in the readers' advisor in an academic setting. "The function of the Readers' Advisor in the college library is to relate the student's classroom reading to appropriate readings, to guide his non-curricular reading, and thereby to broaden his base of knowledge"(Lyle 243). Although the position of Readers' Adviser in the academic library disappeared decades ago, reference librarians, particularly those involved with library instruction have been providing this service on a daily basis, not only by answering questions, but by preparing instructional handouts, subject guides to resources, bibliographies, and classroom instruction. Now, academic librarians have created excellent online guides to resources by incorporating their print subject guides and bibliographies of library resources onto their web sites. Several sites have taken advantage of the technology to include links online resources to their subject guides. Ken Middleton's guide, *Women's History: A Guide to MTSU Library and Internet Resources* is an example of a bibliography that includes both library resources and links to resources on the Internet. Another example that includes both library and Internet resources are the *Resource Guides by Subject* from the University of South Carolina. The *Women in Science and Technology* site combines library instruction, library resources, and Internet links to encourage and facilitate student research and learning. The Internet offers academic librarians a challenge and an opportunity to adapt this technology to the encouragement of reading for pleasure and knowledge, and to continue the tradition of the Readers' Advisor.

Web Site Examples
Book Browser

http://www.Polyweb.com/BookBrowser/index.html
Deaf in Literature from the Wallace Library, Rochester Institute of Technology
http://wally.rit.edu/pubs/guides/deafinlit.html
DeVry Dupage Library --lists new books added to the library collection
http://www.dpg.devry.edu/library/
Dollie's Corner from Northwestern University. A virtual leisure reading area. Recreational reading and Internet links. http://www.ghsl.nwu.edu/dollies_corner.html.
Good Reading from the Fairfax County Public Library
http://www.co.fairfax.va.us/library/reading/menu.htm
Good Books to Read from the Dayton and Montgomery County Public Library--lists of recommended titles in the usual and unusal categories--Books about food in fiction, and amnesia, etc, as well as the usual serial killers and vampires.
http://www.dayton.lib.oh.us/~ea_jan/goodreads.html
Good Reads from the Normal Public Library. Annotated lists of new fiction and non-fiction, movie tie-ins and cool magazines in the Normal Public Library.
If you Like....from a New Zealand Public Library.
http://www.ccc.govt.nz/Library/IYL/
If you like.... from the Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, Indiana.
http://www.acpl.lib.in.us/ACPL_Locations/Branches/shw_ifulike.html
Leisure Reading in Physics from the Wallace library
http://wally.rit.edu/pubs/guides/phybks.html
Literature and Languages: Selected Reading Lists from the Harold Washington Library Center. A wide variety of bibliographies and readings lists on various genres and topics.
http://cpl.lib.uic.edu/001hwlc/litlists/litlists.html.
Middle Tennesse State University Library lists new books, best sellers, readers' advisor, subject guides to resources and bibliographies.
http://www.mtsu.edu/~library
MIRAGe from the Mid-Illinois Readers' Advisory Group. Extensive lists, links, and bibliographies for the interested librarian and reader.
http://www.prairienet.org/mirage/homepage.html
MMC Newstand on the Web from Busse Center Library, Mount Mercy College.
http://www.mtmercy.edu/lib/newstand.htm
New Leisure reading at Russell Library from the Ina Dillard Russell library Georgia College State University. http://Peacock.GAC.PeachNet.EDU/~techserv/leisure.html.
NOBLE North Boston Library Exchange
http://www.noble.mass.edu/booklist.htm
NoveList from CARL Corporation. Home page for this electronic resource for Readers' Advisory.
http://222.carl.org/nlhome.html
Philosophy and Ethics: A Guide to Resources from Georgetown University, a library guide with selected resources.
http://gulib.lausun.georgetown.edu/dept/reference/philosophy/
Popular Books on Browsing from the University of South Carolina. A list of new books with links to plot summaries. http://www.sc.edu/library/catalog/browsing/poplar.html
http://www.sc.edu/library/catalog/browsing/brows.html (Browsing Home Page).
Readers Advisor for Information and Computer Science Heyward Ehrlich's book length essay and annotated bibliography on resources available on this subject.
http://newark.rutgers.edu/~ehrlich/clbook1.html
Reader's Advisory from MTSU University Library, a virtual reading room.
http://www.mtsu.edu/~vvesper/read.html
Reader's Advisory Services from the Los Angeles Public
Library. Mostly a listing of authors for different catagories of genre fiction.
http://www.colapublib.org/advisory/index.html
Reader's Advisory-Fiction the Web Station of the Flint Public Library in Michigan.
The purpose here is to suggest Internet resources which will allow staff and patrons the opportunity to make informed choices in the areas of book selection and reading material in the five genre sections that the library's collection is divided: General Fiction, Mysteries; Romance; Science Fiction; Westerns and Short Stories.

http://www.flint.lib.mi.us/fpl/resources/FPL_Readers_HomePage.html
Reader's Robot from Kevin Kierans, Manager of Library and Support Services at Thompson Nicola Regional District Library System, Kamloops, B.C.
http://www.tnrdlib.bc.ca/rr.html
Readers' Services Page from the Rochester Hills Public Library includes Sites for Book Lovers with links to book reviews, author interviews, awards, genre fiction, lists of books, ideas for reading groups.
http://metronet.lib.mi.us/ROCH/readadv.html
Resource Guides by Subject from the University of South Carolina, Thomas Cooper Library. Includes library resources as well as Internet resources. http://www.sc.edu/library/tcl.html#bibs
http://www.sc.edu/library/bibs/womsci.html
Romance Novel Database from Christiana Powell at the University of Michigan. Many annotations and reviews as well as links to resources in the genre.
http://www.sils.umich.edu:80/~sooty/romance/
University of Missouri-St. Louis includes in their virtual library a small section for leisure reading.
http://jinx.umsl.edu/services/library/virtual/
Virtual Reader's Service Desk from the Morton Grove Public Library. Many services for readers, including bibliographies, coming bestsellers, annotated list of selected new books, links to other book related sites.
http://www.nslsilus.org/mgkhome/mgpl/rsdesk.html

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